

Part VI

1950s

The Wilmington Public Library kicked off the decade with a special event for young readers entitled Young Wings. In anticipation of the event, the library purchased many new juvenile books about how children live in foreign lands.



Young Wings 1950

In January 1950, the library sent 500 books to the town of Carolina Beach to assist in the formation of a town library. In return, the town promised to provide a library room and be responsible for funding library personnel and supplies. Organized by the Woman's Club of Carolina Beach, the library was first located in the old Town Hall and Fire Station.



First Carolina Beach Library

Miss Emma Retires

Mrs. Emma Woodward MacMillan, hired as Chief Librarian in 1924, retired in 1951. During her tenure, the library grew from 10,168 volumes to 53,318. Circulation increased from 29,430 to 124,066, and income from fines and rentals rose from \$437 to \$2,587. In regard to the bookmobile service she helped inaugurate, Mrs. MacMillan said "It's the finest thing we've ever done; the library ought to be proud of it."

She built the library's North Carolina Collection, which is considered one of the finest in the South. Mrs. MacMillan continued to pursue her passion for local history during her retirement, publishing *Wilmington's Vanished Homes and Buildings* in 1966.

Born in Wilmington in the 1890s, she died in her hometown in 1975.



Emma Woodward MacMillan

A Welcome Gift

The City Fathers' decades-long quest to find a better location for the library ended when the Wilmington Light Infantry offered to deed 709 Market Street to the community. The WLI was organized in 1853 as a militia company. Later it became a military reserve unit associated with the National Guard. In 1892, they purchased the former John A. Taylor house built about 1846 for the former New York businessman who moved to Wilmington and invested in steamboats and railroads. The building's classical features took on a martial appearance when the WLI placed cannons on the roof and in front of

the building. By the 1950s, membership in the WLI was waning. Two years before the organization's centennial and the disbanding that followed, the WLI transferred ownership to the city, asking only that a portion of the basement be retained for clubrooms until the last of its members died.



Wilmington Light Infantry

Although the building held potential for a library, it was too small in its existing state. The Wilmington Public Library moved into City Hall in 1906 with 4,000 books to serve a population of less than 25,000 people. By 1951, the library contained 56,000 books for 65,000 people.

In 1954, the city held a bond referendum to renovate the WLI building and construct an addition. The bond for \$120,000 was approved on November 2, 1954.

Changes in Leadership

Meanwhile, Mrs. Mildred Harper of Fredericksburg, Virginia, replaced Mrs. MacMillan on July 1, 1952. Mrs. Harper was present for the renovations of the WLI building but resigned her post on March 25, 1956, before the move to the new library location. While Mrs. Harper only lasted a few years in her job, she left a remarkable legacy by hiring Katherine Howell as assistant librarian. In 1954, both Hurricane Hazel and Katherine Howell blew into Wilmington. The storm moved on and Miss Howell stayed.

The joy and burden of moving the library from City Hall to the new building fell to her as acting Head Librarian. The Library Board of Trustees witnessed her success and decided they need not look any further for Mrs. Harper's replacement. The Board members walked over to her house and offered her the job the same morning.



*Katherine Howell
1958*

"I had just gotten out of the bath and was in my bathrobe with hair in curlers when I heard someone at the door," Miss Howell said. "When I opened the door, to my shock and surprise, there stood the Library Board. They offered me the job as Head Librarian and I accepted." It was a good fit and she remained on the job for 28 years.

The Big Move

Renovation of the WLI building began in 1955. The basement provided a special workroom for county bookmobile staff and storage for bound newspapers. The first floor housed a reference book room, a North Carolina Collection room and a reading room, as well as checkout facilities and staff offices. Half of the second floor was renovated for children's services; the other half was left to showcase the library's growing music collection and